

Tomás Goes Global, Celebrates Homegrown Talents

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In its attempt to bolster Thomasian writing inside the campus and beyond, the first two issues of the revived *Tomás*, the official literary journal of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies, devoted their pages to the works of Thomasian writers who are either faculty members, graduate students or alumni of UST. The Summer Creative Writing Workshops, conducted in 2012 and 2013 by the Resident Fellows and Guest Panelists of the UST CCWLS, led by its director Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, helped the previous editors identify undiscovered or emerging writers in the campus.

For the third issue, *Tomás* opened its doors to all writers and literary scholars. As a result, contributions from all over the Philippines and abroad poured in.

The reviewers had a hard time ranking the best works of fiction, poetry, translation and creative nonfiction from a substantial harvest of previously unpublished works by both Thomasian and non-Thomasian writers.

The opening salvo for the third issue is a novel excerpt from veteran Filipino-American fictionist Cecilia Manguerra Brainard titled “Christmas Eve, 1908.” This first chapter narrates the reentry into Ubecan society of a married couple named Jose and Fernanda, after four months of mourning, wrapped in “a cocoon of darkness and dread,” their seven-year old son Danilo having drowned in what appears to be a freak accident. Jose suspects that his son’s death may not be accidental at all (Danilo being a cautious boy) and is determined to find out the truth.

Augusto Antonio Aguila's "The Whole New Nameless Thing" is a non-realist story that chronicles the sexual awakening of Keith, a gay man, who finds himself sleeping with Nina, his "best" friend. The story is interesting because it involves, not only a description of the emotional upheaval the main character undergoes the morning after the act, but also a surreal dialogue between Keith and his owl-shaped alarm clock, which gets interrupted by one of the rectangular patterns of the curtains in his bedroom.

Rogelio Braga's short story, "Mga," depicts the interrelated lives of characters residing in a city, where a sweaty, swaying pachyderm suddenly appears in the middle of EDSA, a woman starts to become invisible, one body part at a time, and where familial relationships are torn apart by forced temporary migration. Braga's fiction manages to capture the peculiarity of current Filipino society: haunted by fantasies and lingering pre-colonial beliefs, and mauled by existing transnational filiations.

Couched in contemporary Filipino and peppered with dry humor, U Z. Eliserio's "Tungkol sa Aso," is philosophical metafiction Pinoy style (the narrator talks about a certain person also called, interestingly enough, "U") who has dog ownership for its ostensible subject, but can also be about the fictionist's attempt to grapple with language, literature, romantic love, pop culture, or maybe, even the very nature of existence itself. The fictional U's life apparently depicts the increasing alienation of the postmodern subject in a Third World country greatly affected by what Fredric Jameson describes as the "cultural logic of late capitalism."

"Mga Dili Angay Hikalimtan/ Necessary Memories," Merlie M. Alunan's suite of poems in English and poems translated into English from the original Cebuano, astonishes and astounds with the way violence in its myriad forms is rendered in poetic language both lyrical and narrative. The last poem, "Stories," recounts the folk narratives circulating in Ormoc City after tropical storm Uring devastated it with heavy rainfall and flashfloods. In the light of super typhoon Yolanda that flattened and inundated Tacloban City with killer winds and storm surges, the last lines of Alunan's poem terrify with their prescience: "Tell stories, tell stories to one another,/ stories of one thing or the other,/ oh, but not the sea, never tell the sea—/ the sea never remembers."

R. Zamora Linmark's "Five from the Best Picture Series" has a cosmopolitan, upbeat rhythm, the poems delving into contemporary popular culture, in particular Hollywood films and celebrities. Linmark's signature verbal wordplay is highly evident as he deploys paranomasia with relish, the punning

most visible in “Midnight in Woody,” an abecedarian poem that seems to be a mock paean to filmmaker, producer, writer and actor Woody Allen.

Romulo P. Baquiran, Jr.’s suite, “Limang Anggulo ng Pag-ibig,” opens with a euphoric initial encounter with the beloved, then tapers off quietly, with a poetic voice that is hurting and grateful at the same time for the vagaries that romantic love proffers to the lover. Baquiran seems to suggest in “Dulo,” that the lover must always be intractable, for it is only he who has access to paradise, however fleeting. “Ikaw na tunay na mangingibig/ ang nakauunawa sa paraisong nalikha/ ng munting yugtong iyon ng kasiyahan.”

Joselito D. Delos Reyes’s suite, “Huling Tao,” which includes “Sa Madadaling Salita,” the poem that won him the 2013 Makata ng Taon award from the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino, deals with time: time spent while in transit, time that has been lost and mentally freeze-framed as projects that never came to be, and time as embodied by an aging father. To wrestle with time is a never-ending human quest, like the search for meaning. But Delos Reyes approaches the subject with that particular mixture of courage, naiveté, and wisdom, which as the poem “Alulod” suggests, can best be found in the child who bathes in the rain: “Hindi ako/ Tatahan. Hindi kailanman/ Pagsasawaan ang ulan./ Hindi alintana ang ragasa/ Ng lagnat na papasabalat,/ Ng luhanang papasamata,/ Ng ubong papasapulmo.”

The critic Harold Bloom famously proclaimed that Shakespeare invented the human. Gelacio Guillermo’s translations of selected passages from *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*, may be read as a reaction to that particularly hegemonic assertion of Western influence. In “Limang Salin mula kay Shakespeare,” Guillermo invents his own Shakespeare: a politicized bard, one whose verses are firmly grounded in the immediate, and one who is aware that there is more to existence than mere being, that real death is being passive while injustices run rampant: “Kumilos, o manahimik, ‘yan ang/ tanong:/ Ano’ng mas marangal, tiisin/ Ang mga tudla ng karumal-dumal na kapalaran,/ O lusungin ang dagat ng mga gulo,/ At sa pagbaka’y sugpuin sila?” (*Hamlet*)

Jaymee T. Siao’s “Alter/Natives: Talismanic and Healing Aspects of Tattoos in Northern Philippines” chronicles her weeklong sojourn to Buscalan in Kalinga Province, where she had herself tattooed as part of her personal (re-) search for the magical and curative qualities of traditional tattooing practices in the Cordilleras. Siao’s essay is written in a style that invites comparison with John McPhee, in its combination of solid research with imaginative evocation

of her experiences amongst the *Butbut*, the indigenous group of Buscalan.

Three touching memoirs dealing with family are offered by Jenny Ortuoste, Ferdinand M. Lopez and John Jack G. Wigley. A precocious girl's vivid recollection of her troubled but enchanted childhood is rendered beautifully in Ortuoste's "Snakes in the Cane," creative nonfiction filled with telling details of the slightly eccentric relatives who adopted her in Bacolod City while her parents were on the brink of legal separation. Ortuoste's narrative rises to lyrical heights even if the events she recounts are quite quotidian, the magical and mysterious, after all, being the provenance of the very young.

The oftentimes confusing and problematic relationship between a gay son and a straight "absentee" OFW father, who is by turns silently reclusive or violently angry, is the subject of Lopez's "Daddy." This piece is both unsentimental and sympathetic, the narrator's effort to understand the motives of his male progenitor through the years successfully bridging, in the end, the yawning gender gap between them, despite the initial differences in their sensibilities and perceptions of the world.

"Mother's Passing" is Wigley's account of the circumstances leading to his beloved maternal parent's demise, after succumbing to, not one, but two degenerative diseases, an event that triggers a distant memory of happier times: his mother beaming with pride as the narrator graduates from elementary school as class valedictorian. Wigley's description of the pain and panic he and his close relatives experienced as they attempted to keep her alive, and later transported her body from a public hospital in Manila to Angeles City, is profoundly moving.

Levine Andro Hernandez Lao's "Pagbabalik sa Bukid," is a modern rendition of the often told tale of "the return of the native." But while showcasing the rural as idyllic, he does not shy away from self-reflexive critique: "[M]aingay ba para sa akin ang aming reunion? Oo, may pagkabaduy, korni, jologs, at maingay." Nonetheless, he still affirms his allegiance to his hometown, albeit with a certain ambivalence: "Maingay, pero hindi pa naman ako naiirita. Hindi ko pa sigurado. Pagbibigyan ko pa rin ang reunion na ito."

This most recent offering of *Tomás* reaffirms the importance of creative writing in UST. The healthy dialogue between Thomasian and non-Thomasian writers in the pages of this issue signals the return of the University to the forefront of literary production.